

Brave by Tom Tomorrow

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Summary: Steve's childhood horrors are put on the back burner when telepathic twelve-year-olds, reappearing missing kids, and supernatural occurrences become the staple of his high school experience. If Steve suffers with a terrible secret in silence, then realizes he isn't alone. (Abuse)

Brave

Fred Harrington is not a brave man.

He is a cruel man, yes. A clever man. A handsome man. But he is not brave.

Brave men don't wage wars on those that cannot fight back. Brave men don't use violence as the first answer. Brave men aren't cowards.

It takes Steve a long while to figure that out for himself.

His father had never been a particularly nice man before, was only ever dignified outside the four walls of the tumultuous household. Because God, within the confines of the home he'd carried a short fuse, impossibly impatient, full of deep-rooted resentment, the mouth of a sailor hurling slur after slur.

In those early years, Steve remembers going to bed and listening to the booming echoes of his angry father, to the thuds that would shake the house, to the screams that weren't quite muffled, and the frantic apologies of his mother. And how he would go to breakfast the next morning, walking on eggshells, avoiding his father's gaze as the man muttered under his breath and pretend not to notice the stiffness in his mother's gait.

Maybe he should have expected it, that one day his father's anger would eventually turn to him. Thinking back though, preparation probably wouldn't have done him any good. And now it's too little too late.

Steve remembers that morning. Remembers being snatched up from the wooden kitchen table by the fraying cotton collar of his ivy-green t-shirt, remembers his scrawny legs dangling in the air, remembers the angry, angry eyes of his father, bloodshot and zeroed on him.

He remembers the blows... three successive, sharp backhands to the side of his head. And now, years upon years later, he can still see the stars... can still feel how helpless, how dazed his seven-year-old self had been.

He had looked toward his mother, who'd been washing the dishes, for an explanation, for comfort, for something, and can still see that soul-tearing moment when she turned her back towards him.

The excuse then had been that he'd been sneaking into what was left of the cake in the refrigerator, even though he knows he asked his mother for permission.

His father had first laid a hand on him two days after his seventh birthday.

... ..

His mother's passiveness is most likely what spurs Fred on because after that it is every little thing.

It is not cleaning the dishes well enough. It is not having dinner warm and waiting, even if he comes home hours later than arranged with no forewarning. It not having his shirts ironed just right. It is not breathing the air in the room fucking properly enough.

It is every little thing, until Steve can barely open his eyes, without fearing some type of violent repercussion.

His mother finds her escape in the little white pills that come packaged in the orange prescription bottles. Until she's only ever physically there, never mentally.

He finds his escape in basketball.

It doesn't keep his father from coming after him.

It doesn't stop him from going to bed hungry and waking up sore.

It doesn't stop him from wondering what he did wrong.

.... ..

Fred Harrington is a dead man.

Everyone knows it, including Steve.

It is a truth he had realized the very moment his father took his last rattling breath, nearly drowned out by the stuttering grind of machinery, all of the plastic tubes and borrowed blood and nurses in starched white uniforms not quite enough to keep him alive a moment longer.

Steve had been thirteen years old, when his mother had gotten the call.

A car accident. He had swerved right off the road. And that was that.

He remembers being very happy to see him go. And maybe that makes him a bad person, but he had always known that there was the possibility he was a bad person, had known it even as a seven-year-old wishing death upon his father as Fred brought his belt down again and again on the bare flesh of his backside, until the buckle broke the skin.

The town doesn't remember him as the monster the man was, having died without anyone ever figuring out the monstrosities he'd been able to bestow. So, Steve is forced to listen as *friends* and *coworkers* express their condolences and grieve for a fabrication of a man that he is almost positive never existed. Then one by one watch them drift away because the friends never really knew the Harrington's, only what Fred had wanted them to see.

Until they're just as alone and isolated, as they'd been when *he* was alive.

His mother starts taking her pills with alcohol.

And the heavy weight on his chest shifts only ever so slightly.

Fred Harrington is a dead man, but the scars are here to stay.

....

Entering his freshman year, all of his wounds have tapered over.

The things in his everyday life that would set him off used to be everywhere. He never anticipated that there were more things than loud noises and high pitched voices that could send him spiraling.

Over the years, there've been a whole boatload, from loud noises, to certain turns of phrase, to bed-springs squeaking, to a certain type of smile. These and more have set him off at one time or another.

But the summer before high school, there had also been a good two months where he may or may not have exhaustively-obsessively-researched trauma behavior in an attempt at making himself better. Holed himself up in the library reading every book, every story he could get his hands on with any sort of credibility, until he could find a way to smother that scared little kid who couldn't fight off his father.

Because he couldn't live with losing minutes, hours, days of his life to silence and rage and uncertainty and god, fear. He couldn't live with closing his eyes at night and careening backwards into something that he'd always wanted to leave behind.

And if his father had given him anything, it was resilience.

He'd learned to look after himself in his home that's not a home. He'd learned to take the parts of him that hurt, the parts that are basically festering wounds, and hide them away so no one else will see.

And as he gets older, Steve teaches himself to hide behind bravado and ego and a shit-eating grin, behind sex and snark and just a bit of an asshole.

That way, even if no one notices that he's all torn up inside, at least they won't take advantage.

... ..

The first day of his freshman year, Steve meets Nancy.

Doe-eyed, kind-hearted, dainty, beautiful Nancy Wheeler.

Nancy sees right through him and his bullshit. Even when all his teachers, his classmates, and his coaches don't have the slightest idea about his facade. It terrifies him at first, that someone can look so completely through him like that, but it is also a relief to not have to be completely cut off from society. Too not have to pretend that hard.

It's hard to tell how much Nancy knows because he'd never explicitly said it and she never delves too deeply into the topic, but her unwavering presence and quiet acceptance that there is something different about him is something unlike anything he'd had in forever.

Steve finds her easy to talk too. He hangs out with her at school, away from school, even at her home, not his. Never at his. Conversing for hours on end, driving out to the city lines, exploring the hidden sites of Hawkins, Indiana, the ones you'd only see if you were really looking. And throughout it all, he finds himself unveiling bits and pieces of himself, he's sure he'd lost years ago as he really, really gets to know her.

He meets her brother Mike, twelve going on twenty-five, and her brother's friends just as goofy, just as adventure driven and excitement prone. He meets her parents, who are everything his mother wasn't and his father would never be.

Mr. Wheeler offers to teach him how to fix his car. Mrs. Wheeler asks him to babysit Mike and by proxy the rest of Mike's friends. They invite him to cookouts and barbecues and Sunday night dinners.

They include him.

It is terribly reminiscent of what could have been.

And he's convinced that if Nancy didn't know then, she knows now, in the way he can't quite contain the shock of them wanting to be associated with him. But she is ever present and never wavering with her support.

Gratitude can't even begin to describe what he's feeling.

On the Saturday before the fall of his spring of his sophomore year, Steve stands on the Wheeler porch, leans in, and kisses Nancy Wheeler.

And he realizes he loves her, but maybe not in love with her.

Steve doesn't know what to feel about that.

... ..

In the months that follow, Steve feels sick to his stomach. It is unfair to lead Nancy on like this. To lie, when all she has ever been was kind and understanding.

Don't be a coward, he whispers to himself.

Don't be like his father.

So, he decides to tell her everything. Everything.

Even the things he's been too afraid to tell himself.

And God, it takes the nerve to work the words out of himself.

But that cool summer morning, he forces the words to become audible.

Nancy sits there, silent, unwavering, listening. She doesn't interrupt, she doesn't scoff, she doesn't stop him.

But when he's done and her silence still reigns, he wants to run away.

This was a mistake. A horrible, horrible mistake. And now he's going to lose Nancy, the only one who truly, really understood, him. He's going to lose her-

Steve swallows but he can't. There's a tightness in his throat that stops him and suddenly everything he's been feeling all of his life, the tension and the fear and the loss of something being here for him comes bundling out together and he sobs, once, bending to put his face in his hands but Nancy pulls him into her arms before he can.

It's more kindness that he's ever been touched with and he leans into it.

"It's alright, Steve. I know. It's alright." She does know, Steve realizes, she really does. She's assumed what he has himself. Maybe always knew about what happened to him in the past. But somehow, she's stayed here, somehow, she's still here. Not looking at him with pity or scorn, but empathy and understanding.

Having been named a curse by his father more times than anything -

born into a family that beat it into him - he knows that this must be rare. Because no one will even dare to bend a rule, no one will associate with outcasts like him, no one else would stay. There are aggressors, brutes, abusers, and there are people who will not understand, who will not stop even if he screams -

"It's okay... I'm not going to look at you different. I'll never look at you different. I'll always be here for you."

It takes long moments for him to lift his head up to look at her, his heart swelling so much that it hurts to feel it beat in his chest.

"I - " His voice sounds wet, clogged, "Thank you."

Nancy doesn't let go.

... ..

Things happen quickly after that.

His childhood problems and personal life are put on the back burner when telepathic twelve year olds, reappearing missing kids, demagogues, and unexplained supernatural occurrences rapidly become the hallmark of his high school experience. And though he's no stranger to violence, and very few things rattle him to his core, it is terrifying sobering that nasty excuses for human beings aren't the only monsters that exist. There are real ones too.

It makes Steve want to scream at the sky.

Hawkins, Indiana is supposed to be uneventful.

It's another prairie dawn, another small town. Light frost glitters in the grass, on rooftops and windshields. Cold wind whips through the bare limbs of a few scrawny maple trees, clattering the branches like bones, carrying the scents of fried diner food and highway exhaust. Families go to church, kids ride their bikes, everyone knows everyone and exchange polite greetings from behind their white picket fences.

Steve sucks in a lungful of crisp air and squints at the smeared palette of the sky, but the voice of his mother calls him back to reality.

He crunches through a sad strip of browning snow and picks up his nail-embedded baseball bat as he makes his way back into his house.

Hawkins, Indiana is supposed to be uneventful.

It's not anymore.

... ..

He meets Billy Hargrove. Or rather Billy Hargrove meets him. Or rather Billy Hargrove targets him in his junior year.

Billy Hargrove is the new kid from Southern California.

His youthful face is sharp and angular, as if sculpted from marble, but with enough cushion in his cheeks and under his eyes to add a sort of eternal grace to him. The long dark blonde curls of his mullet fall in ringlets down his neck. His demeanor is strong, his swagger confident, his athletic prowess salivating.

Billy Hargrove has instantly caught the eye of every girl in the school and has wasted no time shooting up the rings of the Hawkins social ladder.

He catches Steve's attention for a different reason. The look in his cobalt eyes. That look of otherness, of eyes that see things much too far, and of thoughts that wander off the edge of the world. The look that comes from seeing too much too young. The look of trauma.

He'd only seen that look in few people before and Billy hides it well.

Because while he's strong and confident and smooth, he can also be angry.

And anger is a surefire way to make sure everyone didn't ask questions. Anger is a surefire way to make sure no one looked too deep.

But Steve isn't everyone. And Billy doesn't seem to like those who see right through him.

He makes Steve his personal project.

Pushes him into lockers, shoves at him in the halls, yells at him to plant his feet on the court, turns off the water in the showers when he's in it. Inflicts just enough harm to escape serious consequences.

And while it reminds Steve a little too much of his father, it doesn't really bother him, not past being a standard annoyance, though Nancy's convinced he should tell someone.

But he has no interest in putting a target on his back, in fact, he's a little more curious why Billy's focused on him, when he quite literally has the pick of the litter.

The worse thing, he thinks, are the slurs. The 'worthless little shit's', the 'faggots', the 'assholes'.

Billy hurls insults as often as women hurl themselves at Billy.

Steve shrugs them off.

He has other things to worry about.

Protecting the kids to worry about.

Saving the world to worry about.

And over the weeks, the otherness in Billy's eyes morphs into desperation, especially when he doesn't get the reaction he wants.

But all Steve can think is why the otherness was there in the first place.

....

Max Mayfield comes into the picture much later.

Steve isn't sure how he got roped into being designated babysitter, but it's better than watching his mother drink herself into a stupor and it feels right to help the kids out and be the one they can look up too when he never had that for himself.

So, it is amid looking for the Dart lizard thing, whatever in the hell it's supposed to be, with Dustin, he is first introduced to her.

She's a red-haired tom-boyish, twelve-year old spitfire. Thin, small, and lanky, but arguably comparable to one of the guys. And the guys are infatuated with her. Or at least Lucas and Dustin are. Mike has only, will only ever, have eyes for Eleven. And Will has too much on his plate to care.

But Steve's heard her name leave the duo's mouths too many times, for them not be obsessed.

Something about the wisp of a girl though, is off-putting, and it lights a feeling of uneasiness within his stomach that he can't explain.

This 'Max' is eager to participate, eager to prove herself, and is really the only one providing any legitimate help, which he points out to the love-struck boys.

She says she moved here from California, but that only elevates his unease.

Maybe it's the way she says it, short and clipped. Maybe it's the way every other word out of her mouth is filled with forceful, standoffish sarcasm. Maybe it's her mannerisms, how she doesn't quite look him in the eye, how her hands are always shoved in her pockets.

Steve doesn't know, just that it feels painfully familiar.

And that bothers him.

Later that night he realizes why.

She acts like he did when he was younger.

He sees himself in her.

And he can't breathe for its echoes, can't swallow for the churning nausea in his stomach, can't think for his mind is clouded by his fear. The world is spinning and he is standing, stumbling in the bus, jerking for the reaching fingers of his friends, his family, his loved ones -

Dustin frantically shaking his shoulder snaps him out of it.

No. Stop it.

Just because it happened to him, doesn't mean it happens to everyone.

You barely know this girl, stop being paranoid.

Six hours later Billy Hargrove beats him into the floor of the Wheeler Household.

He'd been looking for his sister.

The connection not made earlier is obvious now.

Billy Hargrove and Max Mayfield are siblings.

The realization makes him feel sick to his stomach.

...

In the interest of full disclosure, Steve spends the first few weeks with bated breath, waiting for the other shoe to drop and for the fragile sense of peace that he'd found to be completely torn apart - because it's only a matter of time, he's sure.

Billy's been avoiding him.

Steve doesn't see him in the hallways, in the parking lots, or in the cafeteria.

Hell, he doesn't even come to basketball practice, something that infuriates the coach.

But Steve knows he's at school because he sees the blue Cadillac, dented around the edges from when Max veered off the road, in its usual parking spot. Knows because he keeps an eye out for it every single day.

But it's only a matter a time, it's always a matter of time, he's sure. But one week turns into two, then three, then a month, and it never comes.

With his own scars still healing, Steve doesn't know why the lack of Billy's presence bothers him so much.

If anything, he should be glad.

No Billy, means no bullying. It means no pain.

For some reason, his unease doesn't waver.

... ..

Squeals of excitement mix with laughter as snowballs fill the air, swishing through the gently falling flakes of white to smack against the lanky middle schoolers bundled up against the biting cold. The Wheeler's backyard is filled with the kids enjoying the cold winter's day, either building snow structures or snowmen or battling it out with snowballs. And God knows they deserve to be kids, after everything that had happened in the last month.

Jonathan and Nancy were lingering around the edges, whispering to each other with lingering smiles on their faces, unwilling to participate in the childish activities, wishing to be seen as responsible adults, but still young enough to enjoy the weather and excitement in the air. Something twists in his heart when he sees them and the affection they share for each other. He knows that Jonathan cares about Nancy and Nancy is happy with him. And he wonders if he could ever have something close to that one day, but Steve supposes that being alone can be enough for now.

"Hey! Hey! Zoomer! Join our team, we're outnumbered and -"

Mike's shouts shake him from his reveries.

"No! Get over here, you know El's practically three people!"

Dustin yells in protest, lobbing another snowball in the duo's direction.

Steve twists toward the backyard entrance from his position on the wooden porch.

Sure enough, it's Max, unmistakable red hair flowing in the frosty

wind.

Surprise worms its way up in him. She'd refused to carpool over once again and he hadn't heard the roaring engine of Billy's car, her skateboard is nowhere in sight, had she walked here?

The kid is hunched over, trying to protect as much of her skin as possible from the bitterly cold air, trembling and pulling her thin jacket tighter around her.

Jacket. Jacket. Jacket... The same jacket she'd been wearing all those weeks ago in the junkyard.

It's twenty degrees, those are no proper clothes for this weather.

The poor kid is shivering in the snow.

Where is her coat?

Where the fuck is her coat?

Nancy must be thinking the same thing, having detached herself from Johnathan, making her way over.

"Aren't you cold, kid?"

Steve calls as Max drifts slowly towards the porch, away from the other kids who continue with the fight. Everyone, except for Lucas, who is trotting up to join them.

And as Max drifts closer, he finds himself standing, because the younger girl is limping. The stutter in her gait isn't obvious, but it's enough for him to notice something is wrong.

She's not acting like the cocky twelve-year old he saw in the junkyard. Nor easy-going like the celebratory one he saw shortly after they saved Will. Not even the shy girl, he'd seen at their little Winterball.

No. She's more reserved now, eyes downcast and the smile just a shade too forced. Though, with her shoulders held back and jaw set, he'd doubted she'd ever admit to it.

"Max? Are you okay?"

Nancy murmurs gently, imploring for an answer, when the twelve-year-old doesn't answer Steve, but the redhead refuses to meet her eyes. Any of their eyes. Instead, she does that thing where she looks just slightly left of them with a steely, half-hearted glare.

"M'fine."

The redhead mutters dismissively, barely a whisper in the wind, gaze darting first to Lucas, then towards where the rest of the kids are at war in the snow.

Nancy hums. The kind of hum his mother used to make when she knew he was lying.

The rush of emotions surge forward within him like a frightened horse, consuming him making his hands start to shake. He must clench his hands to make them stop.

"Where's your coat, Red?"

Steve's words come out dry and cottony in his struggle to keep his tone even. His heart ramming in the pit of his stomach as it fell.

"I lost it."

Steve has to lean close to hear her, but it doesn't stop him from seeing.

To anyone else, it would've been imperceptible. The faintest crinkle of Max's brow, almost a squint, gone before it had ever even fully shadowed the green irises.

She's lying.

He'd used that excuse before.

"You lost it?"

Lucas asked incredulously.

"How did ya-"

Steve cuts the younger boy off with the motion of his hand.

Max shrugs and her hands shove deeper into her jacket pockets.

"I lost it."

It's only a fraction more believable than the first time she said it, but the younger girl is unwavering, jaw firmly set, stance rigid, as if daring them to question her words.

Nancy hums again. She doesn't believe her either.

Steve wastes no time taking off his jacket and wrapping it around the younger girl, even when the bitter cold nips at his freshly-exposed skin. It's almost comical how big his coat is on her. It could have fit around her twice, as skinny as she was. Had she always been that skinny?

Max doesn't respond to any of it. Doesn't even move to slide her arms into the sleeves.

Instead her gaze has flitted to Lucas again, thoughts having gone elsewhere. She's practically leaning toward him like a fly to light. Eager to get away from their prying eyes.

Nancy's gaze slides over Max's head to meet his own.

And she knows.

He knows she knows.

She knows like she knew about him.

He isn't being paranoid.

....

Steve listens to the wind rustling the leaves on the nearby chestnut tree, his hands tucked behind his head, staring up at the wooden ceiling; unable to sleep, unable to stay awake. His whole body itches;

feeling too hot and too cold, skin stretched over bones too tight. And that is when he decides.

He let his father beat him blue.

He let his father make his life hell.

And he got lucky when his father died.

God be damned, if she wasn't so lucky.

God be damned, if he let it happen to someone else.

.... ..

He finds Billy.

Or rather he waits next to Billy's blue car until the Californian finally shows up.

Steve's unsure what the plan was. To talk, to blame, to yell, to scream. Jonathan and Nancy had wanted to come with him, but he insisted on doing this alone. Because it's a horrifying reality, that when Billy turned his attention away from Steve, he'd doubled up his efforts in fighting with his sister. No one else should have to be put in his crosshairs.

"You're a coward, Billy! A coward!"

The anger has had time to simmer within Steve, it's had time to thicken, until it coats him, white hot and angry.

"What the hell are you doing, Harrington?"

And in his rage, Steve misses how tired Billy sounds, how tired he looks.

Because how can Billy saunter up like his. How can he be present and only slightly annoyed when he's putting hands on his sister, when he's hurting her. It's unbearable, to know that this could have been going on for months, that this could have always been happening, and he has the audacity to show his face and ask Steve what *he's*

doing. And this is the tipping point. Steve cuts Billy's own sentence off by throwing a punch right at his face.

It sends Billy reeling back, nearly knocking him right into his car.

This at least elicits a proper response from him— shock. He lifts a hand to his cheek where the punch had connected.

Steve doesn't wait for retaliation, and he knows that's unfair, because Billy doesn't even expect it. It's dirty to hurt someone who won't fight back. It makes him exactly like his father. But there's anger singing through him and a lifetime of regrets crawling up and down his spine and he doesn't give a shit. All he can see is what his father did to him and what Billy is doing to his sister, as he leaps forward and tackles the Californian to the ground, curling his fist again to aim at face.

"How could you fucking do that? She's twelve! How could you fucking lay a hand on her!"

His fist cuts through the air, landing another blow as anger fuels his movements. Then another and another, and Steve's hands are shaking, chest heaving, as he raises his fist again before he realizes Billy's not fighting back. Instead, Billy only looks at him, hands at this side, not even defending himself. He looks so fucking tired, so fucking done.

"Max is twelve! Have some fucking respect and take responsibility for your actions!"

That's all it takes for the fire to roar back to life.

"What are you waiting for, Harrington? DO IT! DO IT!"

Billy's face is right in his. Eyes manic and crazed. For a moment, Steve hesitates. He is more unnerved than his expression has allowed.

"Come on, don't wuss out now! Do it!"

Billy yells with fury, spittle flying in Steve's face, reminding him of the fight those weeks ago in the Wheeler's house. But there is a tremble in his voice. It sounds like he's begging.

"C'mon! Hit me!"

Steve's eyes are stinging and Billy's face becomes a blur.

"Do it! It's all I'm good for anyway!"

Fuck.

And he looks at his reddening knuckles in shock.

It isn't Billy who's hurting Max, he realizes,

It's their father.

It's Neil.

Fuck.

Steve releases the hold on the Californian's jacket, letting him drop unceremoniously to the floor.

Billy looks as surprised as he felt, clearly expecting another punch.

The remnants of his anger blow out like a candle in the wind, as Steve scrambles up.

Shocked and horrified, about what has happened, as he hurries away.

Steve learns a lot about Billy that afternoon.

Learns that they're really both the same.

Half in the shadows, half burned in flames.

In the center of their father's unrelenting rage.

And Steve had fucked it up by going psycho on his ass.

...

Three days later the house phone rings in the middle of the night.

And when Steve turns to his side, his digital clock on the bedside

table glows a blurry quarter past twelve.

He sighs, pushes himself effortlessly off the bed to answer it. No need to wake his mother.

It's not like Steve was sleeping anyway, too busy watching crackles of lightning that shoot through the night sky, too busy listening to the menacing rumble of thunder. Too busy thinking about what Billy had said.

"Steve? Steve!"

It's Dustin. Why the hell is Dustin calling him at midnight?

Outside, the heavy rain beats a steady tattoo against the window.

"Dustin, what's wrong? Where are you?"

And the basketball player is pulling on a pair of jeans, looking for his keys, as he tries not get tangled up in the phone cord. Knowing that this, whatever this is, won't be resolved over a ten-minute chat.

Chaos reigns in the background of the phone call. Nothing but hushed whispers, shuffling footsteps, and high pitched panicky voices all talking over each other. He knows Dustin is there, he thinks he hears Lucas, maybe Will, but that kid had always been so damn quiet, and from Steve's end none of it is decipherable.

But they sound scared, and that's enough for him.

"It's a code red... Code red!"

Dustin is saying. Desperation carrying his voice into a higher octave.

Fuck.

"Dustin. Calm the hell down and tell me where you are!"

There is a moment of stunned silence.

Then Dustin is speaking again.

"We're at my house."

He whispers at last. And somewhere in the vestiges of his mind he remembers that Dustin's mom was out of town.

"Okay. Okay. Stay there. Don't move!"

It doesn't dawn on him why they called him first.

... ..

They're all there it turns out.

Okay... Okay...

Steve's heart roars in his chest. His veins are frigid, blood sledging through them like mushy ice. His hands are shaking, and this time he can't make them stop.

They're all in Dustin's living room. All the younger boys plus Eleven. Eleven who stands to the side eyes dark and troubled. And he tries not to let that bother him because Eleven only does that when something's wrong... wrong... wrong...

The boys part solemnly like the red sea when he enters.

Revealing a wisp of a figure they'd been swarming around before.

Max.

Oh god.

She's back in her red jacket again, limbs splayed like a rag doll, head lolling to the side. Nothing but pale skin and stringy muscle as the purple velvet of Dustin's living couch all but encompasses her, swallowing her whole.

But that isn't what makes his stomach twist.

It is the unmistakable deep purple bruising around her eye. Large and unforgiving, already swelling, encroaching up her forehead, spreading down to the crook of her jaw.

The fluorescent light only enunciates it.

There is a terrible, horrible silence.

And the boys are all looking at him. Waiting for him to do something. Anything. But he is frozen.

Because when he sees Max's face, he sees his younger self. Living through this the first time around had been a nightmare; forcing himself to overcome it in an arguably unhealthy way had been the most difficult thing he'd ever done. Now, however, seeing it happen to someone else, to have someone else in his place, it tears him apart.

Nancy'd been right. He'd been right.

And it's too much. Too much. He can't do this. He can't.

He has half a mind to turn around and walk out.

Steve thinks of his mother then, how she had turned away, when it was his purpling bruises. Thinks of how she turned away and just let it happen.

He isn't his mother.

Don't be a coward.

"Hey... Hey... Red..."

In moments, Steve's kneeling in front of her.

Voice as soft and non-threatening as he can manage, even when they're weighted with emotion.

It takes a moment for Max to react to his presence, her eyes open, but not focused.

It takes a moment to realize this is even more horrific that he'd originally assumed.

"I... You didn't... h-have to call... him, stalker..."

Max's words come out slurred and there's a long lag between her words and her actions, blinking sluggishly, head wobbling as she tries

to pinpoint Lucas in the room, arms unsteady and weak as they attempt to redistribute weight.

He knows this.

His mother is *this* all the time.

"What happened?"

He asked quietly, trying to be the calming force, but his throat dry clicks with emotion and the resulting crack betrays his lack of confidence. Because somehow when he's experienced this, he still feels out of his depth.

Because why... why... why...

Why is this goddamn world so cruel?

They all answer.

"I went to get water and good thing I did too, because she was all sprawled out next to the shed. She was super loopy too. I called the gang cuz-" Dustin starts.

"But we didn't know what to do so-" Lucas interrupts

We were going to tell Mrs. Byers, but El said you were-" Mike jumps in.

"She going to be okay, right? Can you fix a concussion?" Will murmurs.

It's not a concussion.

Her pupils are blown, yes, but her smile is too serene. Her movements are sluggish, but they're filled with euphoria. And she's shivering, shaking even in the warmth of Dustin's home.

Someone must have given her something.

"He's a bad man." Eleven whispers.

Something concrete. Something that puts the final nail in the

proverbial coffin.

Steve turns his attention back to Max.

Looking how fragile her wrists are, how thin her arms, how she was sprawled there on the couch, injured and dazed, because someone had taught her that horror was what generally happened next. A wave of protectiveness sweeps over him and he raises a hand to silence the others.

"Hey... Hey... Do you remember what happened?"

Voice soft and soothing once more.

Max's head lolls to the side, half-lidded glassy eyes peering at him dreamingly.

She smiles lazily.

"He's a bad man."

Echoing hoarsely what Eleven had whispered.

It's heartbreaking to hear Max say it.

Like she's accepted it.

"He... He..."

Max shifts too far to the left, hitting her arm against the arm of the sofa, and groans.

"What else hurts?"

He asks immediately, but the girl is still talking over him, the familiar stubbornness of the old Max seeping to the surface.

"He... He..."

So, Steve takes initiative, gently grabs the redhead's arms, and rolls up her jacket sleeves, and seeing just what he'd been hoping not to see – all those welts and bruises. Some of the bruises were older than others and the same went for the welts, but there wasn't much of her

arm that had escaped.

Oh God.

Tears burn his vision.

"Call Nancy and Mrs. Byers..."

He says to no one in particular, then pauses for a moment before adding-

"And Hopper."

He couldn't do this on his own.

He couldn't save them on his own.

He hears footsteps moving behind him, but he doesn't dare look away, not when Max is still talking.

"He... He... He..."

The kid is too traumatized to finish the sentence; the shaking overwhelms her and somehow, he is shifting himself onto the couch, and finds himself pulling her in against him, tucking her under his arm and stroking some calm into her fiery, red hair and as he holds her tight. Telling her that was okay, that she didn't have to keep talking, that she was safe now, even if in her barely lucid state, she can barely understand him.

"It's going to be okay... We're here with you.... We have you now."

Steve whispers as she trembles against him.

"We have you know, you're safe..."

Because that's what he would have wanted someone to say to him.

..

Hopper and Mrs. Byers approach the front door like harbingers.

Moving like ghosts, faces solemn and full of anger, sadness, pity, and

regret.

It seems like they can't get through a month without any of the kids being on the receiving end of irrevocable damage.

The boys are shepherded to another room. Even Lucas, despite his protests against leaving.

Hopper steps aside as well, when Max shies away, instead he lets Joyce take over. Let's Joyce try to coax Max into coherence.

Eleven hovers in the background, they've allowed her to stay, but Steve doesn't move, refuses to move until Nancy gets here.

And Nancy arrives shortly after, takes his place next to Max, because she knows, she understands...

And Steve looks at Max, watches her curl her fist into Nancy's cardigan and relax into her shoulder, as he prepares to leave, even when he doesn't want too.

But he must find Billy.

Because if Max is hurt, Billy must have been too.

One rarely happened without the other.

...

"It was two hours" is the first thing Billy says, broken and tired, when Steve steps out of his car and onto the pavement of the school parking lot, the third place he'd tried looking.

He toys with the idea of turning his car off, because to leave his headlights on makes the situation feel like a noir interrogation, and that's not the look he's really going for, but in the end he decides against it. Because it's still dark outside, despite the sun pushing the pink of dawn into the sky.

And he refuses to do this in the dark.

The other Hargrove sibling sits on the hood of his car, a glass bottle

of beer cradled in his hands. And when Billy looks at him, eyes bloodshot, but seemingly unflappable as ever, Steve knows it isn't his first bottle. Knows that he's probably been drinking here all night.

Steve recognizes panic, understands how people like them hide behind their vices in situations like this, and he understands that that alcohol is Billy's.

And honestly, Billy isn't that much better off than Max.

In the beams of his vehicle headlights, Steve can clearly see the split lip, the cut above his left eye, and his own purpling bruises.

"Two hours," Billy continues shakily, still on the defensive. "I took an extra shift at work, because M-Max's birthday is coming up... her birthday..."

There's an unexpected moment of quiet in which Steve is left scrambling for something to say but he must say something, anything to fill the lull of silence, and when he finally responds, it is words Billy what he doesn't want to hear.

"It isn't your fault," he begins hesitantly.

The words aren't comforting. He knows they won't soothe the Californian, because those words had never soothed himself. Those words are what *everyone* always says. And when everyone says it, it's hard to believe, even when it's true.

"It was... It was... I came back and everything was a mess. The house was wrecked and there was blood. And Max was gone... gone. But he... was there. He's always there..."

There's absolutely no reason, Steve thinks, for Billy to be saying all of this aloud. He doesn't want to hear it, he never asked for the details. He doesn't need the play by play, when he's seen the results with his own eyes. But, there's a part of Steve that deserves to listen to every excruciating detail because- because- because this reaffirms that he is a coward.

Because he had his suspicions all along and didn't do anything. Instead, he waited until Max was injured and drugged out of her

mind. Instead, he waited until Billy was hurt and alone and barely holding it together.

If he'd been brave, he could've stopped it right then there. If he hadn't had been so scared, none of this would have happened.

If it was anyone's fault it was his.

It's easier to comfort others than himself

"Billy," Steve mutters, voice gentle as he interrupts Billy's frantic recounting of events, approaching him like a wounded animal. "It isn't your fault."

"I don't know what I did."

The eldest Hargrove takes another swig of the bottle, full of self-loathing and hopelessness, as he turns away, ignoring the hollow comforts.

Steve tries to pick this sentence apart and find the words to help.

It's nothing you did, he wants to say, but he'd be lying to himself if he didn't sometimes think about the very same thing late, late at night.

On a basic level, he knows there's never any reason to it. There's nothing either of them ever could have done to warrant any beating so bad from the men who were supposed to love them. He knows that if the Hargroves or the Harringtons had anything resembling a real relationship, this would have never happened.

On another level, he thinks that there is no reason someone could carry enough hatred to warrant violence, if he had truly done nothing wrong.

Those warring conflicts haunted him for years, almost impossible to rationalize.

"I tried to be good. I tried. I was respectful. I was responsible."

Billy's rambled words are low and self-deprecating, as Steve inches closer, now an arm's length away.

"You'd think following the rules would get you somewhere in life."

His voice cracks, then his shoulders are shaking softly, and the Californian's head is buried in his hands.

He's crying.

Billy Hargrove is crying.

Oh, Steve thinks, and he is reminded again of just how deeply his damage runs and the accompanying pain that is knowing that he will never, ever be able to make it right. Steve hurts for Billy. He hurts for Max. He hurts for himself. He hurts for his childhood that was ripped away from him, hurts for the childhood that was forced away from them, and he hates that the one thing that is sucking the life out of Hargrove siblings is still there.

Steve stands in silence as Billy weeps, doesn't dare take the moment away from him, but Billy's choking off the sobs as soon as he starts. As if he's remembered, in his drunken stupor, he's not alone.

"What are you even doing here, Steve?"

He's asking, as though he would fully accept rejection. Teary red-rimmed eyes turn back toward him. And Billy looks so, so tired of it all. Like he's just so sick and tired of waiting for the other shoe to drop, of waiting for everyone he loves and cares for to turn away from the dirt and filth that fills his soul.

"I beat the fucking shit out of you. Why do you even care?"

There it is, that proverbial clanging bell that means that Steve is running out of luck, that the walls are climbing back up.

And Steve knows what he must do, but he can't explain it in words. Not in this emotion fueled atmosphere.

So instead...

He meets Billy's accusatory gaze and lifts his shirt.

Shows him the scars. Shows him the bumpy, knobbled skin that criss

crosses and decorates his torso like mottled, fleshly tattoos. His bruises have long since faded, but the split skin that comes from the buckles of his father's belt, it only changes form. And he lets the wounds speak for themselves.

It is the first time he's shown anyone except Nancy, though it seems Eleven knows at this point, or at the very least suspects something.

Billy doesn't say anything at first. Cobalt eyes darting all over Steve's torso, then slowly, painfully his line of sight drags up to meet Steve's own hazel gaze.

"You too?"

He murmurs in fractured disbelief.

"Me too."

Steve says quietly, when everything is said and done, anguish clear in his eyes as the shirt falls back down. Anguish for the childhood they would never have, for the pain and loss that has dogged their steps since the day they were born and drew the short straw.

"I'm sorry."

Billy whispers brokenly.

"It's okay," he says after deliberating, voice hoarse and exhausted and he slowly reaches out and takes Billy's hand in his own.

The Californian doesn't pull away

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

....

The ride to Dustin's house is mostly in silence. Filled instead by alcoholic melancholy and quiet despair.

In the end, Steve had coaxed Billy to ride in the car with him, claims

that they'll come back for his blue Cadillac late, because right then the drunk California teen had been in no state to drive.

Steve can see the curious eyes of the boys through Dustin's bedroom window as he pulls into the driveway, disappearing as soon as eye contact is made, and he turns off the ignition.

He looks toward Billy whose

"Max is in there...."

He starts.

"And so is Chief Hopper..."

Billy tenses.

"They know it's not your fault Billy. They know. They just want to help."

Billy's hands are shaking in tandem with his trembling shoulders.

He looks like he's going to cry again.

"They just want to help..."

Billy starts in his seat, drawing in a shaky breath.

"Thanks, Steve... T-thanks."

And together they get out of the car.

.... ..

Chief Hopper tells Billy and Max they'll never have to go back to Neil's house again.

And even though it's the Hargrove siblings escaping the abusive household, Steve wants to cry like he's the one that was freed.

The weight that's been on his chest for years shifts, and suddenly he can breathe.

Suddenly, he feels like he's done something right, for once.

Suddenly, he doesn't feel alone.

Later, Joyce Byers thanks him for his quick actions. Thanks him for keeping the boys calm.

And Nancy hugs him. Tightly, without restraint.

"Are you okay?" she whispers to him, when they get a moment alone.

Surprisingly, Steve finds himself nodding. He is. He is okay. And that's a strange feeling to feel.

"You are so brave." Nancy commends him, and she hugs him close again.

Brave men don't wage wars on those that cannot fight back. Brave men don't use violence as the first answer. Brave men aren't cowards.

And he supposes he wasn't a coward in the end.

He'd gotten the guts to do the right thing when it mattered.

Steve Harrington isn't like his father.

Steve Harrington is brave.

It took him a long enough to figure that out for himself.

Author's note: Let me know what you thought?